

*Giving Alice a Place in the Wonderland of the Nineteenth Century:  
A Study of the Literature and Social Construction of Girlhood in  
Victorian England*

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

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Muncie, Indiana

21 July 2001

Sept 11  
Thesis  
on  
girls  
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the  
social  
construction  
of  
Victorian  
girlhood

## Abstract

This thesis analyzes Lewis Carroll's 1865 work *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and places it within the context of girls' fiction and the social construction of Victorian girlhood. It examines the didactic literature which came before *Alice* as well as the progressive literature which followed it. It illustrates that Carroll's work and especially its heroine, Alice, represent the transition between those two trends in literature written for and about girls.

## Acknowledgments

Profuse gratitude is extended to Dr. Malone who has given immeasurable amounts of time, flexibility, encouragement, enthusiasm and consideration to this project. This project might never have reached its somewhat elusive conclusion without her assistance.

I would also like to thank Dr. Joanne Edmonds who gave her time in the beginning of my long and, at times, frustrating pursuit of a thesis subject.

***Giving Alice a Place in the Wonderland of the Nineteenth Century:  
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In 1865 Lewis Carroll published what has become one of the most famous pieces of Victorian literature: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. His main character, Alice, is a typical Victorian middle-class girl who undertakes an atypical fantastic journey. We see her slowly but determinedly shed the behaviors and expectations of "normal" life as she gets ever deeper into Wonderland. It becomes clear that Alice is indeed in a Wonderland far removed from Victorian society where almost anything is possible. As Jan Gordan points out, Alice's sort of "...adventure is possible only after turning one's back on civilization and its joyless values."<sup>1</sup> Yet, at the same time, Alice encounters another set of values and expectations. When she finds that many things in Wonderland are nonsensical she challenges the rule-makers. In the process she becomes an active and thinking girl on a voyage of self-discovery. Alice discovers for herself that she can be an assertive and self-reliant girl; something otherwise unheard of in the Victorian era.

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is an important example of the vast literature written for and/or about girls during the course of the nineteenth-century. In the earlier part of the century, writers and publishers had discovered a new audience and market for literature: girls. As one very popular author of girls' fiction, Charlotte Yonge, said, "...girls are indiscriminate

devourers of fiction." Moreover, she added "The semi-religious novel or novelette is to them moralizing put into action, and the most likely way of reaching them."<sup>2</sup> This last comment suggests the important point that literature performed an educative function by teaching girls moral lessons. Yonge was one of the most famous of the writers who, following this idea, produced what has been called didactic literature. She and others published stories meant to instill in girls the Victorian ideals of self-control, denial, goodness, obedience, and passivity. These were the ideal traits necessary for the women who would fulfill their prescribed roles as wives, mothers, and housekeepers. By the 1880s a new trend in girls' literature began to appear when authors, such as L.T. Meade, were writing progressive literature. Her novels centered on the very different themes of adventure, education, and friendship for girls. Her magazine *Atalanta* discussed girls' education, sports, the arts, and even employment opportunities. All of this suggests a very different conception of girls; girls who are not passive but active in the world outside their homes. Thus girls' literature underwent dramatic changes over the course of the nineteenth-century reflecting, as some historians have argued, changing ideas about the socialization of girls.

The aim of this study is to place Alice within the context of these important trends in literature for girls. It is my

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Gordon, "The Alice Books and Metaphors of Victorian Childhood," in *Aspects of Alice*, ed. Robert Phillips, (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1971), 93.

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Yonge quoted in J. S. Bratton, *The Impact of Victorian Children's Fiction*, (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1981), 159.

contention that Carroll's work represents a transition between the didactic and progressive literature of the period. Throughout the story, he criticizes didactic literature with its prescriptions for proper behavior and constant emphasis on moral lessons. Moreover, Alice does not behave like a typical girl; she is active, strong, and willing to stand up for her beliefs. She is also knowledgeable about the arts, politics, and social customs. The overarching element in her character is her practicality, a virtue usually associated with household management, which she uses to order both the public and private world around her. For these reasons, it may be argued that she represents a new type of girl that will figure prominently in the progressive literature of the later nineteenth-century.

#### ***Didactic Literature for Girls***

In the Victorian era, girls were meant to be raised and brought into their pre-assigned sphere of domestic influence. In the Victorian household, girls were seen to be women-in-training and little more. The first lesson for girls was domesticity; any interest outside of this theme was seen to be selfish. Indeed, according to Carol Dyhouse, "...above all, and whatever her social class, the growing girl tended to be seen as a problem when and where she showed signs of cherishing anything resembling autonomy."<sup>3</sup> Just as Rousseau's "enlightened" ideals shaped the concept of motherhood, so too did didactic fiction for girls. For girls to transform themselves into the idyllic Victorian

images of the "Household Fairy" or the "Home Goddess," a rigorous training was required which "by no means concentrated on formal academic lessons."<sup>4</sup> While their brothers went almost daily to school when not needed for "men's work" at home, girls most commonly stayed home with their mothers to help with the housework. Indeed though, as Anna Davin has written, this "domestic labor...was not perceived as work but as training appropriate to their future."<sup>5</sup> Just as women occupied the private sphere of influence of home and family, girls too were meant, at least in the earlier parts of the nineteenth century, to gain their education at home. According to *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management*, a work intended for and in fact thrust upon the middle-class population, the mother of the household "...ought always to remember that she is the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega in the government of her establishment."<sup>6</sup> Mothers, to their daughters, were not simply the Alpha and the Omega, but everything in between.

Ideally, their mothers were the sole agents for the domestic training of Victorian girls. Concern began to grow, as the century progressed, that Victorian mothers were unable for one reason or another to manage this task. Out of this concern grew an expressed need for didactic literature. While mothers were meant to teach their daughters the practical day-to-day

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<sup>3</sup> Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up In Late Victorian and Early Edwardian England*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1981), 138.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Rowbotham, *Good Girls Make Good Wives: Guidance for Girls in Victorian Fiction*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989), 99.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London 1870-1914*, (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1996), 133.

lessons of domesticity, didactic fiction helped instill lessons of morality where mothers might lack the means or the character to do so. Though there were didactic stories available to both boys and girls, I want to examine its effects on girls because girls were given the most careful instruction through these stories. It is the Victorian girls who were made most strenuously to read these stories. It was the Victorian girls who had very clear lessons to learn of social placement, social expectations, and familial obligations. The early Victorian literature, "authorized" by parents, served as moral guides for girls. The literature chosen for girls to read included stories teaching the three most important lessons: the lessons these girls would be expected to extol as women: "self-denial, guilt, and philanthropy."<sup>7</sup>

The story of "Hester Wilmot" is only one of Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts* meant to instruct the poor of proper religious and social behavior. Hester is the daughter of two morally reprehensible characters: a drunken father and an aggressive, angry mother. Though Hester must face the daily challenges of living in such a virulent and morally limited household, she is diligent in her obedience to both her parents as well as her church. The politically conservative and Evangelical lesson of More to young girls was that "obedience,

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<sup>6</sup> Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: an Idea in Fiction*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 35.

<sup>7</sup> Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, 30.



the acceptance of one's station in society, sobriety, and cleanliness" could ensure happiness and salvation.<sup>8</sup>

Charlotte Yonge is perhaps the most famous example of a Victorian didactic author for girls. Yonge is given credit for standing apart from many of her didactic contemporaries in that "she tackled the far more difficult task of making her readers want to emulate heroism in everyday life, to find glamour in steadfast duty and self-denial."<sup>9</sup> Yonge, however popular, belongs clearly among her didactic contemporaries. As with the others, Yonge stressed explicit ideals of passivity expected of Victorian females. The unflagging obedience and submission emphasized in Hannah More's story noted above is highlighted in many of Yonge's works. In *Hopes and Fears*, it is the male character who acts on his devotion in his mission "...to that dreadful population, means of discovering their sick, of reclaiming their children, of causing their true light to shine in that frightful gross darkness that covered the people."<sup>10</sup> He is the hero in this story, but also there is the character of Miss Fenimore who is something of a heroine who redeems herself and mends her ways to "...a condition of high intellect and perfect morality."<sup>11</sup> Yonge's characters may not be perfect, but they almost consistently find themselves improved and restored to a heightened state of morality by their novel's end.

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<sup>8</sup> Hellerstein, Erna Olafson, Leslie Parker Hume and Karen M. Offen, eds., *Victorian Women: a Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France and the United States* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981), 38.

<sup>9</sup> Alethea Hayter, *Charlotte Yonge*, (Plymouth UK: Northcote Publishers Ltd., 1996), 20.

Reading these tracts which espouse the glories of goodness, one is keenly aware of Yonge's conservative class-consciousness as well as her concern for female submission. Yonge's political beliefs as a conservative Tory underlie her stance on socio-economic permanence. Yonge "saw no need for radical reform of the status quo of class division and financial inequality."<sup>12</sup> Yonge's ordering and insistence upon class difference is one key difference between her writing and era than the authors who came after her.

Yonge and the writers of the Oxford Movement came from a school of thought which held that the masses of poor as well as the middle classes could be reached through the same stories in the same medium; literature could be an aid to not only moralize Victorian society, but also, popular literature could warm hearts to the church. Revival sentiment in the church sparked much debate among religious zealots about the sort of literature that could be used to foster good feelings for the church. In the 1850s, books were considered "weapons" in the debate between the conservative evangelical Christian belief and the somewhat more progressive Oxford Movement. The Oxford Movement writers believed that literature could not only spread the doctrines of the church but could also be used to enrich the lives of people everywhere with its wholesome message.

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<sup>10</sup> From Charlotte Yonge, *Hopes and Fear* quoted in Barbara Dennis, *Charlotte Yonge (1823-1901) Novelist of the Oxford Movement: a Literature of Victorian Culture and Society*, (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press), 47.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

This attitude of philanthropy opened new avenues for women like Yonge, whose prolific writings were quite popular among the didactic works. Of Yonge, the *Manchester Guardian* said:

Few women have played a really greater part in a great religious revival, none have done the work given to them by God more simply, more loyally, more devoutly.<sup>13</sup>

Yonge, according to one historian, had a great strength in her "capacity to make goodness interesting."<sup>14</sup> Yonge's self-proclaimed purpose was to "teach...self-restraint" to children as the "kindest thing" which might be done for them.<sup>15</sup> Yonge is considered to have reached beyond her limits as a didactic author to become a popular author, meaning that girls actually enjoyed and chose to read her works. Yonge said of girls, "[they] are indiscriminate devourers of fiction. The semi-religious novel or novelette is to them moralizing put into action, and the most likely way of reaching them."<sup>16</sup>

Yonge still receives criticism from a wide audience for the ideas she champions in her writing which were certainly popular with traditional patriarchal authority at the time. Alethea Hayter identifies one of the most grinding of complaints from Yonge's critics,

Above all, filial obedience is the strongest thread in the pattern of male dominance and female docility which is interwoven with all Miss Yonge's plots. Her novels portray all types of parents, from the noblest to the most fallible, from devouringly affectionate vampires to coldly unloving and aloof egotists, from austere scholars to dissolute men of the world, but

<sup>13</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 8 April 1903.

<sup>14</sup> Bratton, *The Impact of Victorian Children's Fiction*, 183.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

filial submission to the worst as well as the best is regarded as an inescapable duty.<sup>17</sup>

It is these ideas which were cause for the most disappointment in the lives of somewhat more adventurous Victorian girls.

Passivity and submission were these ideals which girls were expected to live by and which would be challenged by others later in the century.

The prevailing theme for girls growing up in the early part of the nineteenth century was a consistent sacrifice of autonomy. In their homes, they were meant to be seen and not heard. In schools, if such a luxury were afforded them, they learned only what might be useful to them in their futures of serving and entertaining their families and guests. The literature which targeted them meant to teach them to always sacrifice desires for the road to morality could only accommodate those girls who understood the concepts of self-control, denial, and, above all else, passivity.

#### ***Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: Placing Alice in Nineteenth Century Fiction***

I will examine three themes in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: commentary on the contemporary situation of Victorian girlhood, advocacy of a change in this situation, and also commentary on Alice's quest of self-discovery inherent in such a transition. By doing so, I hope to make clear the components of Lewis Carroll's work as a transitory piece in Victorian girls'

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

literature as well as Alice's development from a passive to an active character.

Throughout *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, we hear bits and pieces of some of the lessons taught Alice in didactic lessons, songs, and poetry. Every time one such lyric appears, however, Carroll has altered it in one way or another thus proving that the old ways of the didactic lessons and morals really have no place in Wonderland. One such example follows where Alice recites a poem rather incorrectly:

How doth the little crocodile  
    Improve his shining tail,  
And pour the waters of the Nile  
    On every golden scale!

How cheerfully he seems to grin,  
    How neatly spreads his claws,  
And welcomes little fishes in,  
    With gently smiling jaws!

This version is a parody of the didactic poem by Isaac Watts titled, "Against Idleness and Mischief" which follows:

How doth the little busy bee  
    Improve each shining hour,  
And gather honey all the day  
    From every opening flower!

How skillfully she builds her cell!  
    How neat she spreads the wax!  
And labors hard to store it well  
    With the sweet food she makes.

In works of labor or of skill,  
    I would be busy too;  
For Satan finds some mischief still  
    For idle hands to do.

In books, or work, or healthful play,  
    Let my first years be passed.  
That I may give for every day

Some good account at last.<sup>18</sup>

A poem advocating the utility and earnest of children has become, for Carroll, a poem about crocodiles hunting their prey. Indeed, as Alice indicates quite early in the story, "...it [would seem] quite dull and stupid for life to go on in the common way."<sup>19</sup> Carroll even goes so far as to openly mock the importance of "finding the moral" to things. The ridiculous exchange between Alice and the Duchess found in chapter nine highlights the uselessness of forced morals:

..."You're thinking about something, my dear, and that makes you forget to talk. I can't tell you just now what the moral of that is, but I shall remember it in a bit."

"Perhaps it hasn't one," Alice ventured to remark.

"Tut, tut, child!" said the Duchess.

"Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it." And she squeezed herself up closer to Alice's side as she spoke...

"The game's going on rather better now," [Alice] said, by way of keeping up the conversation a little.

"'Tis so," said the Duchess: "and the moral of that is - 'Oh, 'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round!'"

"Somebody said," Alice whispered, "that it's done by everybody minding their own business!"

"Ah, well! It means much the same thing," said the Duchess, digging her sharp little chin into Alice's shoulder as she added, "and the moral of *that* is - "Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves.'"

"How fond she is of finding morals in things!" Alice thought to herself...

...said the Duchess: "flamingoes and mustard both bite. And the moral of that is - 'Birds of a feather flock together.'"

"Only mustard isn't a bird," Alice remarked.

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Gardener, ed., *The Annotated Alice*, (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 1971), 38.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

"Right, as usual," said the Duchess: "what a clear way you have of putting things!"

"It's a mineral, I *think*," said Alice.

"Of course it is," said the Duchess, who seemed ready to agree to everything that Alice said: "there's a large mustard-mine near here. And the moral of that is - 'The more there is of mine, the less there is of yours,'"

"Oh, I know!" exclaimed Alice, who had not attended to this last remark, "it's a vegetable. It doesn't look like one, but it is."

"I quite agree with you," said the Duchess: "and the moral of that is - 'Be what you would seem to be' - or, if you'd like it put more simply - 'Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.'"

"I think I should understand that better," Alice said very politely, "if I had it written down: but I can't quite follow it as you say it."

Certainly Alice too arrives at this conclusion of futility, but, according to the Duchess, "Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it."<sup>20</sup> Dialogues such as this consistently frustrate Alice as they occur throughout Wonderland. Elsie Leach refers to these conversations as "the illogical ways of adults - their ponderous didacticism and contradictory behavior."<sup>21</sup> Alice, in a world quite unlike her own feels free to question such lunacy.

Besides Carroll's exhibition of Alice as a character who begins in the reality of an early nineteenth-century girl, there seems to be little support for the world previously known to her. Carroll, however, seems to advocate less than a dismissal of this world. Though Alice must draw on her own curiosity and resourcefulness to conquer her fears and incomprehension of

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>21</sup> Elsie Leach, "Alice in Wonderland in Perspective," in *Aspects of Alice*, ed. Robert Phillips, (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1971), 92.

Wonderland, she seems to retain some fundamental values which remain with her throughout her adventure. While at the Duchess's home, Alice observes a home environment incompatible with her Victorian values in which home was seen as the place "where the heart is:"

"You don't know much," said the Duchess; " and that's a fact."

Alice did not at all like the tone of this remark, and thought it would be as well to introduce some other subject of conversation. While she was trying to fix on one, the cook took the cauldron of soup off the fire, and at once set to work throwing everything within her reach at the Duchess and the baby - the fire-irons came first; then followed a shower of saucepans, plates, and dishes. The Duchess took no notice of them, even when they hit her; and the baby was howling so much already, that it was quite impossible to say whether the blows hurt it or not.

"Oh, please mind what you're doing!" cried Alice, jumping up and down in an agony of terror. "Oh, there goes his precious nose!" as an unusually large saucepan flew close by it, and very nearly carried it off.

"If everybody minded their own business," the Duchess said, in a hoarse growl, "the world would go round a deal faster than it does."

"Which would not be an advantage" said Alice, who felt very glad to get an opportunity of showing off a little of her knowledge. "Just think what work it would make with the day and the night! You see the earth takes twenty-four hours to turn round on its axis..."

"Talking of axes," said the Duchess, "chop off her head!"

Alice glanced rather anxiously at the cook, to see if she meant to take the hint; but the cook was busily stirring the soup, and seemed not to be listening, so she went on again: "Twenty-four hours, I think; or is it twelve? I..."

"Oh, don't bother me," said the Duchess, "I never could abide figures!" And with that she began nursing her child again, singing a sort of lullaby to it as she did so, and giving it a violent shake at the end of every line:

"Speak roughly to your little boy,



And beat him when he sneezes:  
He only does it to annoy,  
Because he knows it teases."

CHORUS

(in which the cook and the baby joined):

"Wow! Wow! Wow!"

While the Duchess sang the second verse of the song, she kept tossing the baby violently up and down, and the poor little thing howled so, that Alice could hardly hear the words:

"I speak severely to my boy,  
And beat him when he sneezes:  
For he can thoroughly enjoy  
The pepper when he pleases!"

CHORUS

"Wow! Wow! Wow!"

"Here! You may nurse it a bit, if you like!" the Duchess said to Alice, flinging the baby at her as she spoke. "I must go and get ready to play croquet with the Queen," and she hurried out of the room. The cook threw a frying-pan after her as she went, but it just missed her.

Alice caught the baby with some difficulty, as it was a queer-shaped little creature, and held out its arms and legs in all direction, "just like a starfish," thought Alice. The poor little thing was snorting like a steam-engine when she caught it, and kept doubling itself out again, so that altogether, for the first minute or two, it was as much as she could do to hold it.

As soon as she had made out the proper way of nursing it..., she carried it out into the open air. "If I don't take this child away with me," thought Alice, "they're sure to kill it in a day or two. Wouldn't it be murder to leave it behind?"...<sup>22</sup>

From this excerpt we see Alice asserting the rights of the "child" as well as her own. She has been brought up in the Victorian home where mothers are nurturers. She realizes when the Wonderland characters are behaving in an uncivilized manner,

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<sup>22</sup> Gardener, *Annotated Alice* 83-86.

and she is prepared to call it as such. Alice's middle-class upbringing does not allow her to tolerate the amount of insolence she suffers and witnesses in Wonderland. The Victorian expectations of passivity and submission, on the other hand, do not permit her self-assertion. Alice must choose where her priorities are; realizing she is in a land of fantasy, she opts to be assertive and brave.

Carroll uses Alice to praise principles of logic and practicality, but also he uses her to criticize other Victorian practices. Carroll seems to use Alice's experience to advocate change not only in education but also in middle-class ideology. The caucus race in Chapter three is just one example of the many adult foibles which are mocked by Carroll in order to reveal to his adult readers that even the civilized world is often silly. Martin Gardener explains that Carroll was mocking the English parliamentary caucus committees wherein committee members "generally do a lot of running around, getting nowhere"<sup>23</sup> which is exactly the essence of the dodo's race; however, in Wonderland, the desired outcome is to get dry. The court of law operated by the King and Queen of Hearts is an abomination of justice where sentences, particularly those of decapitation, are handed down before the trial even begins:

"...Let the jury consider their verdict," the King said, for about the twentieth time that day.

"No, no!" said the Queen. "Sentence first - verdict afterwards."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Alice loudly. "The idea of having the sentence first!"

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

"Hold your tongue!" said the Queen, turning purple.

"I won't!" said Alice.

"Off with her head!" the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved.

"Who cares for you?" said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time). "You're nothing but a pack of cards!"<sup>24</sup>

In Wonderland, Alice fuses her Victorian reliance upon practicality with her new-found voice to raise a challenge to rule-makers. These factors all seem to contribute to Carroll's as well as Alice's abandonment of a world like the typical Victorian society.

Primarily though, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is the story of one girl's self-discovery. Alice indeed does say to herself early on, "Who in the world am I? Ah *that's* the great puzzle."<sup>25</sup> Alice asks herself this question on her fall down the rabbit hole. As she grows and changes whilst in Wonderland, she discovers the answer. The Mad Tea Party is the scene where Alice reveals to her readers the assertiveness and blunt practicality she has discovered:

The table was a large one, but the three were all crowded together at one corner of it. "No room! No room!" they cried out when they saw Alice coming. "There's plenty of room!" said Alice indignantly, and she sat down in a large arm-chair at one end of the table.

"Have some wine," the March Hare said in an encouraging tone.

Alice looked all round the table, but there was nothing on it but tea. "I don't see any wine," she remarked.

"There isn't any," said the March Hare.

"Then it wasn't very civil of you to offer it," said Alice angrily.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

"It wasn't very civil of you to sit down without being invited," said the March Hare.

"I didn't know it was your table," said Alice: "it's laid for a great many more than three."

"Your hair wants cutting," said the Hatter. He had been looking at Alice for sometime with great curiosity, and this was his first speech.

"You should learn not to make personal remarks," Alice said with some severity: "It's very rude."

The Hatter opened his eyes very wide on hearing this; but all he said was, "Why is a raven like a writing-desk?"

"Come, we shall have some fun now!" thought Alice. "I'm glad they've begun making riddles - I believe I can guess that," she added aloud.

"Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?" said the March Hare.

"Exactly so," said Alice.

"Then you should say what you mean," the March Hare went on.

"I do," Alice hastily replied; "at least - at least I mean what I say - that's the same thing, you know."

"Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter.

"Why, you might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see'!"

"You might just as well say," added the March Hare, "that 'I like what I get' is the same thing as 'I get what I like'!"<sup>26</sup>

Alice learns that she is a girl who can not only take care of herself, but also, she can be an active participant in the world around her. Indeed it is the Wonderland character of the Cheshire cat who invites her into this role:

"Cheshire Puss," she began, rather timidly, as she did not at all know whether it would like the name: however, it only grinned a little wider. "Come, it's pleased so far," thought Alice, and she went on. "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where..." said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

"- so long as I get *somewhere*," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

Alice felt that this could not be denied..<sup>27</sup>

Her adventure is somewhat less like what might be expected from a female heroine, but more like a boy's tale of adventure. Alice learns that she can make her own decisions regardless of whether these decisions lie outside the norm of Victorian behavior. It is not until the end of the tale, after undergoing numerous changes physically as well as emotionally, that Alice regains her usual height and finds her voice and the power to assert herself to all of Wonderland.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Progressive Literature***

Scholars of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* recognize the quandary inherent in her story. Elsie Leach, for example, has written, "The character of Alice herself is a bit puzzling, even to the modern child, because it does not fit a stereotype."<sup>29</sup> The character of Alice in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was based upon a girl known to Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) as Alice Liddell, the middle-class daughter of an Oxford University college Dean. Naturally, this status afforded her better opportunities for education and social interaction. As the daughter of a well-educated man, she was taught by a well-trained governess (a rarity in this period) and had numerous interactions with many other well-educated adults such as the author. All of

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>29</sup> Leach, "Alice in Wonderland in Perspective," 90.

these factors combined to make Alice a rather atypical girl. Thus, it is not surprising that he chose her as a model for his unusual fictional character. Indeed, Alice's character, though unusual in her time of the early nineteenth-century, was ever so slightly less unusual following the passage of the Compulsory Education Act of 1880. Though, as shall be demonstrated, Victorian girls had few opportunities such as Alice's to discover themselves and their voices.

As concerns about the proper education of girls and boys grew in Victorian England, schools also gained greater popularity. Even the "humblest of schools opened up the possibility of influence outside of home."<sup>30</sup> What this meant for girls most particularly was that they at last had the chance to realize that a world existed outside their doors, and they were getting closer and closer to the days when they might see it and even be a part of it. At last they could be autonomous, they were no longer merely children or small women. Also they could experience community being surrounded by other girls coming from similar backgrounds. Girls still faced a world which expected little more from them besides subservience, yet they faced it as a community. This seeming contradiction reappears in the study of the later part of nineteenth century. Just as girls gain individual identities, they discover communities of others just like themselves. Just as girls may have felt they were breaking free from the chains of domesticity, this freedom was only

temporary for the most part, and even in its temporary state, freedom was never completely pure; they remained bound by the social norms of femininity.

Considering first-hand accounts of female students and educators from this time period, it is obvious that the contradictions inherent in these schools for girls were galling. The example Molly Thomas from *The Echoing Green: Memories of Victorian Youth*, reveals the frustration of a student who wishes to study but finds herself in an institution lacking the intellectual challenge and opportunity for creativity she had wished for. What is even more impressive is that her school, the North London Collegiate School is under the supervision of Mary Frances Buss, perhaps one of the most vocal and progressive of the Victorian schoolmistresses. Girls were made to study different subjects than their male counterparts, subjects which, as in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, would be practical for their domestic futures. Molly was fortunate to have a curriculum expanded considerably from the subjects studied by her counterparts in the earlier parts of the era. She studied scripture, mathematics, natural science, Latin, French and German, history, English language and literature, geography, drawing, economics, and the arts of singing, sewing and music.<sup>31</sup> Molly excelled in the academic subjects, but she faced a struggle to enter the school. Any girl who failed to sew a buttonhole was

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<sup>30</sup> Penny Kane, *Victorian Families in Face and Fiction*, (New York: St. Martins' Press, 1995), 64.

<sup>31</sup> Gillian Avery, *The Echoing Green: Memories of Victorian Youth*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), 221.

not allowed to register; her mother's domestic training at home had apparently failed her. Molly also discusses her disdain for the strict rules imposed upon her and her classmates, her fear of Miss Buss, and the clothing the girls were made to wear.

It would not seem that much besides an expanded curriculum had changed for the typical English schoolgirl. As a student in 1836, Frances Power Cobbe said of her experience, "...the heterogeneous studies pursued in this helter-skelter fashion were of the smallest possible utility in later life; each acquirement being of the shallowest and most imperfect kind, and all real education worthy of the name having to be begun on out return home, after we had been pronounced 'finished.'"<sup>32</sup> In her memoirs, she also speaks of her "well-meaning but unwise" schoolmistresses.<sup>33</sup> Comparing Cobbe's experience to that of Molly Thomas, the "modern girl," one might observe the difference in schooling. In Cobbe's time, the complaint was entirely of subject matter and training. For Molly Thomas, the stern discipline and energy wasted on less significant subjects and matters such as behavior and dress were the causes for complaint.

Despite these obvious drawbacks, schools had an enormous impact on girlhood and the literature written for that audience. As Sally Mitchell suggests, it can be argued that schools are responsible for "creating girlhood."<sup>34</sup> Because schools were responsible for bringing girls out of their homes and into

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<sup>32</sup> Frances Power Cobbe, "Life at an English Boarding School," in *Victorian Women: a Documentary Account*, 76.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.



contact with one another, something never-before done en masse, others were forced to recognize their existence as a community separate from everyone else. Though they were kept in the same definitions and limitations as their mothers, these "new" girls were exposed to something new: a life beyond their homes. As they witnessed current events unfold in the world around them, they developed a desire to have an active part in it. Many concerns developed as a result of the emergence of the "new girl" including those about the proper education, dress and behavior for girls. Most significantly for this work, the market for girls' literature expanded dramatically during the 1880s as the magazines and books targeting them as an audience became less like the didactic morality tales of the earlier period. Girls, thanks to schools, became something more than small women.<sup>35</sup>

The works of L.T. Meade are used as example pieces of progressive literature for girls at the end of the nineteenth century. Mitchell details the life and works of Elizabeth Thomasina Meade (L.T. Meade) as a classic example of the sort of "new woman" who was instrumental in the creation of the "new girl." One has only to read the first chapter of *A Very Naughty Girl* by L.T. Meade to gain some insight to the new developments in girls' literature at the end of the nineteenth-century. An introduction to the protagonist and the other significant

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<sup>34</sup> Sally Mitchell, *The New Girl: Girls' Culture in England 1880-1915*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 74.

<sup>35</sup> Although school was not a universal experience until 1880, school stories existed long before then and were read universally by girls. Indeed school stories originated with *The Governess* in 1749. For the "new" girl came the market of school stories which really

characters, all of whom are female, makes important mention of several new themes now important and available to girls of the time: adventure, education, and friendship. Audrey Wynford, an upper class girl lives an isolated life, well educated by her governess who is a Girton graduate. Adventure and intrigue enter her life when she meets Sylvia Leeson, a visitor to her father's castle. Sylvia is described equally as dark and bright. Sylvia makes no pretense of associating herself with Audrey:

"What a girl!" thought Audrey as she pursued her walk. "How dared she! She did not treat me with one scrap of respect, and she seemed to think - a girl of that sort! - that she was my equal; she absolutely spoke of us in the same breath. It was almost insulting. Sylvia and Audrey! We meet in a wood, and we might be characters out of *As You Like It*. Well, she is awfully pretty, but - Oh dear! - what a creature she is when all is said and done - that wild dress, and those dancing eyes, and that free manner! And yet - and yet she was scarcely vulgar; she was only - only different from anybody else, Who is she, and where does she come from? Sylvia Leeson. Rather a pretty name; and certainly a pretty girl. But to think of her partaking of hospitality - all alone, too - with the canaille of Wynford!"<sup>36</sup>

Audrey, upon criticizing this stranger, cannot hide her intrigue, and Meade makes the likely potential of their friendship implicit. Indeed, they will be the perhaps unlikely heroines of the story who work together to bring the "bad girl" to justice and betterment. There is the character of the very naughty girl, Evelyn Wynford who is the antagonist of this story. Through her character, Meade reveals the lessons learned in a somewhat didactic fashion:

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boomed in the 1880s and onward as education became a universal experience for children of both sexes across socio-economic backgrounds.

Thus Evelyn Wynford found the Better Part, and from that moment, although she had struggles and difficulties and trials, she was in the very best sense of the word a new creature; for Love had sought her out, and Love can lead one by steep ascents on to the peaks of self-denial, unselfishness, truth, and honor.

Sylvia's father, after a mighty struggle with severe illness, came back again slowly, sadly to the shores of life; and Sylvia managed him and loved him, and he declared that never to his dying day could he do without Jasper, who had nursed him through his terrible illness. The instincts of a miser had almost died out during his illness, and he was willing that Sylvia should spend as much money as was necessary to secure good food and the comforts of life.

The Squire got slowly better, and presently quite well; and when another New Year dawned upon the world, and once again the Wynfords of Wynford Castle kept open house, Sylvia was there, and also Mr. Leeson; and all the characters in this story met under the same roof. Evelyn clung fast to her uncle's hand, Audrey glanced at her cousin, and then she looked at Sylvia, and said in a low voice:

"Never was any one so changed; and, do you know, since the accident she has never once spoken of being the heiress. I believe if anything happened to father Evelyn would die."

Although L.T. Meade is given credit for being representative of a new style for girls' fiction in Victorian England, it is clear that intimations of the same didacticism from earlier in the century remained.

Outside of her works of fiction, Meade created and edited what was perhaps the most progressive magazine for girls of its time: *Atalanta*. It was read and contributed to by such feminist leaders as Evelyn Sharp<sup>37</sup> and Millicent Garrett Fawcett (with an article on civil service).<sup>38</sup> According to Meade, *Atalanta* was intended to aid young ladies of the upper middle-class in

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<sup>36</sup> L.T. Meade, *A Very Naughty Girl*, (New York: Hurst and Co. Publishers, 1900), 11.

<sup>37</sup> A journalist, novelist, lecturer and militant suffragist.

becoming "new women." Owing to the magazine's availability in public libraries, however, *Atalanta* was secured a wider readership by all girls. Its contents and contributions were strictly controlled so that Meade might ensure that its readers would be encouraged to do something "worthwhile" after leaving school.<sup>39</sup> During the magazine's eleven year lifetime articles were published on education, sports, the arts, literature (including an article written by Charlotte Yonge) and even opportunities for employment.<sup>40</sup> Just like Meade's works of fiction, *Atalanta* proved to have its limitations as well regarding Victorian girls leaving their homes and moving into the greater world. An 1890 article featured in the magazine by R.K. Douglas detailing the damaging effects of higher education on women elicited an angry backlash from *Atalanta's* readership<sup>41</sup> which was more accustomed to *Atalanta's* offerings of suggested methods of attaining higher education, employment, and of informative pieces on women authors, artists and philanthropists.

Long before girls experienced a life outside their homes, they were prepared for it by the books for girls which prefaced their exodus from home and family if such an exodus even occurred. Fiction became gradually less didactic. Characters and plots became less transparent. As Mitchell asserts, "Toward the end of the century, a divide opened between the fiction

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<sup>38</sup> President of National Union of Woman's Suffrage Societies 1890-1918.

<sup>39</sup> Mitchell, *The New Girl*, 13.

<sup>40</sup> In spite of its vision and popularity, *Atalanta* did cease printing in 1893. Meade continued to pursue her prolific writing career: publishing 250 books in her lifetime.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

endorsed by adults and the books most loved by girls."<sup>42</sup> As books lost the elements that made them moral and instructive, they also lost the authorization of parents, but the popularity of girls' books rose in accordance with this loss of wholesomeness. Moreover, as an 1888 study by Edward Salmon reveals, girls actually preferred books targeted more towards boys. In selecting their favorite authors, less than 30% of the girls chose female authors, most often the authors of the didactic fiction. Paradoxically, approximately 50% of their favorite books were by female authors. When asked to select their favorite magazines, "The Girl's Own Paper" <sup>43</sup> came in first place. Second place? "The Boy's Own Paper." When considering popular reading, it is clear that girls preferred to read more progressive action-oriented stories. The most popular girls' book of the study is *Westward Ho!* by Charles Kingsley, a story of adventure.<sup>44</sup>

Mitchell's book, *The New Girl* duly summarizes what theme emerged from the growth of the new girl and the popularity of this new literature:

The new girl's mental life as a boy - fed by fiction, fantasy, games, and education - provided training in

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>43</sup> *The Girl's Own Paper* began in 1880 in fact to answer the position met by *The Boy's Own Paper*. But, as Penny Tinkler indicates, "the Victorian *Girl's Own Paper*, which was essentially addressed to middle-class readers, acknowledged and positively embraced a 'widening sphere' of employment opportunities in the public sphere for young women although at the same time, it promoted Victorian norms of femininity." This plague of contradictions seems common among the progressive writers and publications of the latter part of the Victorian era. Penny Tinkler, "Women and Popular Literature," *Women's History: Britain 1850-1945*, ed. Jane Purvis, (London: University College London Press Limited, 1995), 143.

<sup>44</sup> Jonathon Rose, "How historians study reader response: or, what did Jo think of *Bleak House*?" in *Literature in the Marketplace*, eds John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 196-201.

strength, independence, self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility.<sup>45</sup>

It is clear that what girls wanted in this era was a taste of the freedom and opportunity offered their male counterparts. When they were given the their choice of reading material and pastime, they almost consistently chose those things which were most often considered "boy" activities. Their favorite books and magazines were aimed at boys, and their favorite pastimes were most often sports.

While bold strides were made to bring girls out of obscurity and into the mainstream, they were consistently limited by the Victorian ideal of separate spheres. These examples of popular literature are significant also because of their creation of a market. Whether or not authors and publishers intended their works for a certain class of girl was irrelevant. These works were made available and indeed read by all girls whether looking for an escape from the drudgery of working class life or seeking comfort in the existence of a community.

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

## Conclusion

In the early part of the nineteenth-century, girls were expected to and indeed did behave as isolated, passive individuals learning only what they needed to operate a household. As the century progressed, girls were brought ever increasingly out of their homes and into larger communities of other girls. What girls desired most from this extra exposure to adventure and community was to have all of the luxuries afforded boys: education, strength, independence, and self-sufficiency. A new kind of girlhood was emerging, and its members were getting a glimpse of the life they might someday know and were given some encouragement to actively seek this life. Though the late nineteenth century did open up wider opportunities for them, girls still found themselves stiflingly limited.

The literature aimed at girls may be seen to reflect this important transformation in ideas about their social roles. The didactic literature of the nineteenth century was increasingly replaced by more progressive literature produced by writers like L.T. Meade. And, as I have suggested, the character of Alice in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* seems to be a key character in this shift. According to several critics, she represents new possibilities for female characters. According to Gordon, "Alice, however, is a far more sophisticated volume that transcends the limitations of so much Victorian children's literature while at the same time posing new problems."<sup>46</sup> Leach

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<sup>46</sup> Gordon, "The Alice Books and Metaphors of Victorian Childhood," 108.

argues in favor of the over-arching theme of activity in her assessment of *Alice*. She says, "the underlying message of *Alice*, then, is a rejection of adult authority, a vindication of the rights of the child, even the right of the child to self-assertion."<sup>47</sup> What these readings have in common is the idea that *Alice's* character breaks the "mold" of literary stereotypes which proceeded her. *Alice* is a typical middle-class Victorian girl thrust into situations which require ingenuity and action. Moreover, as she makes her way through her adventure in *Wonderland*, she questions authority and actually asserts herself. *Alice* embodies the values typically associated with boys not girls: bravery, activity, assertion, and independence.

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<sup>47</sup> Leach, "Alice in Perspective," 92.



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